



## *Edge Grant Research*

# **Harnessing potential: career aspirations of students studying equine courses in Further Education in England**

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January 2026

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## Executive Summary

This report explores the career aspirations of students studying full time level three equine management courses in England. Whilst gaining an accurate statistical understanding of the equine industry has proved challenging, there is evidence that within the industry some sectors are experiencing skills shortages. These challenges in attracting and retaining staff in turn impact business delivery. This situation, coupled with a challenging financial environment has contributed to the closure of 250 riding schools since 2018 (British Horse Society 2025). These staffing challenges are also felt in the racing industry with six roles recently added to the immigration salary list, which enables employers to sponsor foreign workers on a visa in roles which are in high demand with not enough UK workers to fill them. Against this background, this study explored the aspirations of those studying equine courses and identified whether their future plans align with skills shortage areas.

To achieve this a survey was circulated to land-based colleges in England which offered full time equine courses. The survey was conducted online using Microsoft Forms and comprised questions to gather both qualitative and quantitative data. It began by investigating the reasons why students had chosen to study an equine course and the factors that had influenced their decision. It then explored their intended destinations on leaving education and the sector they hoped to work in. Finally they were asked to identify any barriers they thought they may face in achieving their intended aim.

Responses were received from 263 students, of these 31 had decided not to continue in the equine sector on completion of their course and exited the survey at question 5. This left 232 respondents who completed the full survey.

The key findings were:

- The student population is heavily gendered with 97% respondents being female. However research has indicated that this bias is not present in all sectors of the equine workforce, this suggests that there may be factors which impact female progression from course to career in these areas.
- Early exposure to horses and substantial practical experience were key factors influencing the decision to study equine. 90% of respondents had been involved with horses for five years or more indicating their interest started in childhood or early adolescence. This was supported by family members who facilitated access to equine related activities.

- The emotional connection respondents had with horses was a significant factor and many expressed a love of horses. It was this connection which had driven them to select equine as an area for study and a future career.
- From the 263 responses received, 88% expressed a desire to work either directly with horses or in an allied industry.
- Indications are that students' aspirations do not align with the current staffing shortages in the sector. In terms of intended area of work, equine therapy was the most popular choice with 14% aiming for a role in this sector. There were a significant proportion, 12.5%, who were undecided. This was followed by the intention to be a professional rider at 12%. Whilst coaching attracted 10.8%, only a small number, 3%, specifically mentioned working in a riding school. The numbers hoping to work in racing were also low at 6% and 6.5% for working with breeding and youngstock.
- Finding a suitable job in the industry was perceived as the biggest barrier to achieving their career aim. In an industry with high number of vacancies this suggests that there is a need to raise awareness of the employment opportunities in the sector. Also for employers to ensure visibility of vacancies to students. It would be of benefit to identify whether it is a skills shortage, mismatch or gap in each area so that targeted work can be undertaken to address these. As part of this, employers need to articulate the specific skills needs for each role. This could then feed into education through influencing the content of the curriculum and creating opportunities to upskill or retrain those already in the sector.

## **1. Introduction**

This study explores the career aspirations of students aiming to work in the equine sector. It begins by identifying the factors which influenced students' decisions to study equine courses in land-based further education colleges. It then considers the careers they hope to progress into, drawing links between past experiences and future aspirations. These findings are set against the reported skills shortages within the equine industry to identify whether students' career aspirations align with the skills shortage areas in the sector. Research into the aspirations of students on vocational courses is lacking. This study extends the current literature by focusing on equine courses within specialist land-based provision, an area which is under-researched. It will also contribute to discussions on aspirations of students on vocational courses and the factors which influence these. The information could be used by employers interested in understanding the pipeline of individuals coming into the industry helping to harness their potential.

To provide context, the report begins with a brief review of land-based education and in particular the provision of equine courses. It continues by exploring the equine industry and the challenges involved in gaining an accurate statistical overview of the sector. It ends by considering some of the skills shortages and workforce challenges that have been identified by the industry.

## **2. Education and Industry Context**

Further Education (FE) is education which is delivered to post-16 learners and sits between schools and universities in the education system in the United Kingdom (UK). The sector delivers a broad range of courses across a number of subject areas with a vocational focus, with the aim of supporting learners' progression either into work or onto further study.

### ***Land-based Colleges***

Land-based colleges have a long history and developed from what were originally known as agricultural colleges, these were widespread across the UK often based in rural counties with strong farming traditions. The Royal Agricultural College (now University) in Cirencester, Gloucestershire established in 1845 was the first of its type and had a focus on farming practice and agricultural science. The sector expanded significantly after World War Two, as government sought to modernise farming through producing skilled professionals trained in new farming techniques and practices. By the 1990s, major

changes had occurred due to shifts in agricultural industries leading to a broader curriculum that now includes areas like land-based engineering, wildlife management and environmental conservation. Equine courses began appearing in UK land-based colleges during the late 1980s and early 1990s as the horse industry grew and demand for specialist training increased.

Despite their decline in numbers over the past four decades land-based colleges are still a distinctive feature of the UK FE system. In 1980 there were 50 independent institutions (Hill 2024), by 2025 there were just 10, the rest having either merged with general FE colleges or been closed through lack of financial viability. Land-based education is expensive to deliver, it requires a wide range of physical resources and the high running costs and decline in funding led to financial pressures on organisations. The number of mergers increased rapidly following a programme of area reviews in 2015 instigated by the government to create fewer larger more resilient providers (Department for Education 2019). Where mergers have taken place land-based education is still delivered on the original site but with the financial security of being part of a larger institution.

Land-based colleges are often in rural locations and manage extensive estates which incorporate farms, equestrian centres and glasshouses required to deliver the curriculum. Landex, a member organisation for land-based colleges and universities, has 39 members across the UK who between them are farming 15,000 hectares (Landex 2025). These institutions provide a wide range of education and training courses for those hoping to progress into the land-based sector in areas such as agriculture, horticulture, countryside management, equine care and animal care. Those who teach on these vocational programmes often have considerable industry experience which they draw on when supporting learners to acquire the knowledge and skills required to progress into their chosen sector.

Further education equine courses are available from level 1 to level 3, with level 3 being equivalent to 'A' Level (an academic qualification which attracts points which can be used for university entry), in terms of value. Courses are often broad in content and consist of a number of compulsory and optional modules which enable colleges to adjust content to suit their particular setting, specialism or resources. For example, they may have riding and non-riding routes as well as options covering areas such as youngstock, competition horses, and rehabilitation. They aim to teach young people the skills and knowledge required to work with horses either directly or in an allied occupation, or to enable them to progress to higher education. To deliver this education, land-based colleges have

equestrian centres, with horses and associated resources such as stabling, arenas, horse walkers, paddocks and exercise areas. In some cases, these resources extended to therapy centres with treadmills and hydrotherapy units. Centres may also operate commercially offering services such as livery, facilities hire or through running shows and events. These provide supported opportunities for students to get involved with activities they are likely to encounter in the world of work

Beginning in autumn 2020, the Government rolled out new technical qualifications across a number of subject areas known as T Levels (technical levels). These have been developed in collaboration with employers and with a focus on industry needs and preparation for skilled employment, through the inclusion of an extended industry placement. The animal care and management pathway was initially developed to include the occupational specialism of equine care and management. A draft of this qualification was produced with seven performance outcomes for review in June 2020. Initially planned for first delivery in 2023, the start date was deferred to September 2024 to allow more time for revision. However, by March 2024, the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education, the body which oversaw occupational maps for T-Levels stated that they would not be developing an equine care and management occupational specialism. Instead, specific equine technical qualifications would continue to be available and as part of the current post-16 qualification reform process, awarding organisations will be able to submit qualifications for funding against the Level 3 Equine Occupational Standard. It is not clear why the development of the T Level was halted but as a result, the existing qualifications remain funded and there has not been a change in qualification and curriculum delivery during the course of this research project. Current students will be studying full time City and Guilds or Pearson (Btec) level three qualifications. Whilst these qualifications contain a substantial compulsory work experience element, it is not the structured 315 hours extended industry placement required by the T Level. The current qualifications are broad in nature and cover many areas of the sector which may open up new pathways the students hadn't previously considered. Students on these courses will have had some exposure to the industry and this may have contributed to their ideas regarding future career opportunities.

The Government has recently announced the development of new vocational courses called V Levels. These will be available from 2027 and are intended to 'simplify the current system and open up more high-quality routes for young people' (Department for Education 2025a), it is unclear yet what this means for equine qualifications.

### ***The Equine Industry***

The equine industry is a significant part of the economy, valued at £5bn (British Equestrian 2023). It is hugely diverse, partly due to the many activities that horses are used for within the sector. This ranges from racing and competition use, through to riding schools and pony clubs, as well as leisure and companion ownership. Gaining a statistically accurate picture across all aspects of the sector is difficult. A report by The Henley Centre (2004, 2) identified two reasons why sizing the horse industry has proven challenging. Firstly, the nature of the industry itself and the links and overlaps between the leisure and professional activities and secondly 'the general lack of robust and transparent data on all elements of the industry'.

These challenges continue, and it is not possible to get an exact figure of the number of horses in the UK. Despite a horse passport system, with all horses required to be microchipped, there are a number of unregistered horses. Defra (2021) stated there were 150,000 horses on commercial holdings but it is not clear what these horses were being used for. British Equestrian (2023) state of the nation report gave a figure of 631,000 privately owned and 95,000 professionally owned horses. There are currently around 14,000 race horses in training in the UK (British Horseracing Authority 2025a). The role of horses in society has evolved over many decades, with a shift to sporting and companion animals. There is increasing recognition of the social value of contact with horses through equine assisted learning and therapy. A recent review of the literature (British Equestrian 2024a) found evidence of the positive impact of equestrianism in areas including physical health, mental health and social and community development. The review concludes that 'evidence suggests there is a unique value in equestrianism not found in other activities' (ibid, 24).

The equine industry is of particular value to the rural economy and is the second largest rural employer (British Equestrian 2025a). However, it can be difficult to obtain data regarding the workforce, due to the number of family businesses coupled with self-employed and casual employment terms. Data from British Equestrian (2023) provides a workforce figure of 230,000, although this is not broken down into job type or sector. An earlier piece of work comprising a strategy for the horse industry in England and Wales, produced by the British Horse Industry Confederation (BHIC 2005) gave a workforce figure of 250,000, but as no further detail is given it is hard to ascertain whether this implies a decline of 20,000 jobs in the intervening years. Alongside work directly involved with

caring for horses, the sector has many allied industries and services essential to maintain the core activity of horse ownership, such as saddlers, farriers, nutritionists and equine veterinary nurses.

It has been reported that the equine industry in England is facing a staffing crisis (Elder 2023). A report by British Equestrian (2023) identified that 44% of riding schools do not have sufficient paid staff and cite this lack of workforce as their biggest challenge to delivery. British Horse Society (BHS) research showed that between 2018 and 2022, 250 riding schools closed, a 15% drop leaving 1,497 in Britain (Jones 2023). Since 2022 the BHS have reported that a further 84 have closed which does show a slowdown in the number of closures (Jones 2025) but is still concerning. There are many reasons that a riding school may cease to operate, with rising operational costs impacting their financial viability and the ability to retain adequate staff. It should also be noted that the period from 2018 includes the covid pandemic which impacted businesses. However, this reduction in centres could mean there are fewer opportunities for young people to experience contact with horses, with an estimated 1.5 million fewer riding lessons available (British Equestrian 2025a).

The problem is not just confined to riding centres with Juckes et al (2021) identifying that the racing industry is also affected. British horseracing is a broad and complex industry which generates an estimated 88,000 jobs through direct and allied industries (Business Matters 2024). Shortages of skilled workers in the racing industry has led to six racing related roles being added to the Governments Immigration Salary List. This is a list of occupations which are in high demand, allowing employers to sponsor foreign workers on a visa, making it easier for yards to recruit workers from abroad into key roles. These roles include racing grooms, stallion handlers and stud grooms. It is hoped that this will address the estimated 2,500 shortfall of staff (British Horseracing Authority 2024).

A Racing and Thoroughbred Breeding Industry survey (Public Perspectives 2022) found that there was an annual vacancy rate of 15% of all permanent stud jobs, and that 53% of these permanent vacancies were classified as hard-to-fill. The report identified not only a general lack of staff but a lack of sufficiently skilled staff particularly stud hands and stud grooms, which are roles working with mares, foals and yearlings. There were also difficulties with retention of staff, with working patterns and hours identified as the main factor in this. The 2024 report (Public Perspectives 2024) which focused on the racing industry, identified that 45% of trainers had hard-to-fill vacancies and again attributed this to a lack of sufficiently skilled staff.

These staffing issues are not new, 20 years ago a strategy for the development of the horse industry (BHIC 2005, 13) reported that the 'horse industry faces major challenges in attracting and retaining sufficient numbers of staff' and suggested that 'the industry needs to develop clear career and qualifications structures, raise training and progression opportunities, improve working conditions, and build closer liaison with careers advisers' (ibid, 14).

This is not just a problem related to England, a foresight study by the European Horse Network (2025, 6) identified key variables likely to influence the future of the sector and found that 'the sector struggles to align with evolving expectations around sustainable work-life balance, career progression and job security, which undermines its attractiveness', it went on to state that 'ensuring the attractiveness and renewal of the workforce will be critical to maintaining sectoral vitality and adapting to future challenges'. It has been reported that the industry faces issues concerning working hours, pay and conditions (Elder 2024, British Equestrian 2024b). The British Grooms Association (BGA), a membership organisation for grooms employed across a range of equestrian disciplines found a lack of compliance with employment legislation in the equine industry, with 55% of those surveyed having no written contract, highlighting the need for compliance and fair employment (BGA 2025). These findings support the need for improved job security and career progression to retain people in the industry.

British Equestrian have included workforce issues within their strategy for 2025-2030. They identify the sector should 'collaborate for workforce excellence', which involves the need to 'actively foster a thriving, skilled, diverse and inclusive workforce, ensuring wellbeing and continuous professional development across the federation' (British Equestrian 2025b, 20). They also recognise the need to 'recruit, educate and retain the best workforce to deliver world-class performances' (ibid, 25). It is useful to consider the role colleges have to play in the education and professional development of the future workforce.

Skills shortages are a national problem, and not just specific to the equine industry, with employers across many sectors reporting difficulty in finding suitable people to fill vacant posts. A Department for Education report (Department for Education 2025b) identified persistent skills shortages in sectors such as construction, where 52% of vacancies are unable to be filled, and health and social care which had 40% skills shortage vacancies in 2022 and highlights the need to create a skills pipeline at all levels to address the issues. The report also considers the impact of technological change, however there is little

evidence that new technologies will drastically change day to day experiences of those working in the equine industry. They are reducing the burden of administrative tasks such as booking of clients, taking payments and keeping equine health management records; however, they require investment both in money and time if they are to be effective. The physical work involved in caring for horses undertaken by individuals in the sector is unlikely to be impacted and therefore the identified issues around working hours and working conditions (Elder 2024) need other solutions.

It is clear that the equine industry, in line with other sectors has skills shortages and hard to fill vacancies. As a result stakeholders within the equine industry have started to reflect on how to attract its future workforce (British Equestrian 2025b, Horseracing Industry People Board 2025). Students currently studying equine courses are part of the pipeline of talent coming forward to work in the sector, understanding their career aspirations could be of use in discussions concerning the equine workforce.

### **3. Methodology**

#### ***Rationale***

This project was designed to explore the career aspirations of equine students in FE colleges. The student voice is not often heard in research and could therefore provide a valuable insight into the area under investigation. Across the equine sector many areas are currently facing staffing issues and as students are the future workforce for the industry, better understanding of their intended destinations could provide an insight to the current challenges. Their reasons for selecting equine as an area of study and the factors which have influenced this could prove useful in informing activities to attract more young people to this sector, widening the pool of future candidates. Understanding the respondents perceived barriers to working in the sector means consideration can be given as to how to address these.

Therefore, the research questions were:

- Why do students choose to study equine?
- What are the intended career paths of students studying equine FE courses in England?
- What barriers do they think they may face in the industry?

## **Research Methods**

The aim of the research was to uncover students' aspirations for their future career in the equine industry. Further, to make a judgement about the factors which have influenced these plans and informed their decision making process. A survey was selected as the most appropriate way to gather the data required to answer the research questions. The benefit of this method is that it is efficient in gathering data from a large scale and dispersed population of students. It is also standardised in that all respondents will receive the same questions. The survey was conducted online using Microsoft Forms. The survey included both closed and open questions. The open questions were used as this was an exploratory survey and these questions will capture authenticity, richness and depth of response needed in qualitative data. The closed ended questions mean that respondents can answer quickly without needing to think of and type a response, it also standardises the responses for easier analysis. The drawbacks are that it may miss unusual or unexpected responses and can simplify the attitudes or behaviours of the participants. However it was considered that the participants may have a limited attention span when engaging with the survey and capturing more basic responses with only two free text questions would likely elicit a higher response rate. The survey therefore gathered both qualitative and quantitative data from the responses which was used to answer the research questions.

The survey questions were designed to answer the research questions and focused on three areas, firstly the reasons why participants had chosen to study equine and the factors which had influenced their decisions. This covered the experiences and the people that had contributed to the decision making process and included a free text question where they could describe what attracted them to work with horses to capture a range of responses. The second area was around their intended destinations upon completing their course and their future career aspirations, where they were presented with a broad range of options to select from. A free text question asking them to describe their ideal equine job was designed to understand the features participants were looking for in a future career. Finally the section on barriers to achieving their goal required them to select options from a list, however they could add a response in the 'other' category.

See appendix 1 for a copy of survey questions.

## **Ethics**

Ethical approval for the study was gained through Bedford College. The questions were not considered to be of a sensitive nature, and the respondents were assured of

confidentiality and that their responses would be anonymous. They were informed that their words may be quoted but they would be anonymised. No personal contact data was collected during the survey.

### ***Pilot***

A pre-pilot took place with a group of six students to test the questions. This took place on 24<sup>th</sup> March 2025 and was done using a paper-based version of the survey. The respondents were encouraged to feedback on their experience. Following this, adjustments were made to two of the question and answer categories. Students took between eight and ten minutes to complete the questionnaire which they felt was acceptable.

The survey was then piloted with a group of 20 to check the data gathering process using Microsoft Forms. No issues were encountered with the use of the online form and completion time reduced to an average of five minutes.

### ***Data Collection***

This research was conducted through gaining access to students studying at level 3 at FE colleges and asking them to complete a survey. Landex has 36 member colleges in England, of these 31 deliver full time level three equine management courses. Landex was approached to request they circulate the research to equine contacts within colleges. In addition, personal contacts within land-based colleges were approached to recruit their students to participate.

The survey was launched on 24<sup>th</sup> April 2025 and kept open for nine weeks until 27<sup>th</sup> June 2025. Information regarding the survey and a link to the form was distributed by Landex through established networks within land-based colleges at the start of the survey and two follow up reminders were circulated. The survey was also promoted in person by the researcher on two occasions at events to relevant land-based staff, to raise awareness and promote distribution to students. Initially the response rate was fairly low, but following reminders and the awareness raising activities described, participation increased significantly, evidencing the need to be proactive in promoting the research.

The survey was open to all level three students studying full time in FE colleges in England, and relied upon being directed to complete this by their tutors. It was expected that students would be able to access the internet through their attendance at college and therefore lack of access to the internet would not be a barrier in completion. The survey was sent during the summer term as it was considered that at this point in their

course (whether first- or second-year student) they would have had some exposure to the industry through their study programme and had time to develop ideas about their future career plans.

### ***Respondents***

Responses were received from 263 students, of which 172 were in the first year of a two-year programme and the remaining 91 in their second year. Of these 263, 31 had decided not to continue in the equine sector on completion of their course and exited the survey at question 5. This left 232 respondents who progressed past question 5.

### ***Data Analysis***

The data were analysed in two ways. Closed questions produced numerical responses which could be presented in table or graph format to visualise the results. Free text questions were analysed using a thematic approach. Thematic analysis consisted of identifying, analysing and reporting patterns in the data as described by Braun and Clarke (2006). The first stage involved reading through the responses in full to get an overview. Repeated words or phrases were then identified and coded and these codes amalgamated into groups known as themes. The themes were then reviewed and refined in relation to the literature. Through this process it was possible to identify key themes which shed light on the research questions.

### ***Positionality***

The researcher has worked in the land-based college sector since 1996, initially joining the sector to teach on equine courses having obtained a degree in equine science. Whilst their career path has progressed from equine to curriculum and campus management, they maintain a connection with the sector through coaching riders.

## **4. Findings and discussion**

### ***Demographics***

There were 263 respondents to the survey from across England. The exact number of students studying level three during the academic year 2024-2025 has not been possible to ascertain. A Landex survey of members (private communication, 2025) resulted in responses from 28 members who between them reported a total of 1,436 students on level three courses. These Landex anonymised respondents may include colleges from across the UK, so it is not possible to say how many of the 31 colleges in England with full time equine provision responded. From this data, the average number of students per

college was 51, so using this figure and multiplying it by the 31 colleges in England an estimated number of students would be 1,581. The 263 respondents would therefore make up 16.6% of this estimated total population of level three students.

Respondents were asked to give the first part of their home postcode and figure 1 shows the distribution of postcode areas across respondents. This demonstrates the coverage across England was fairly broad although there are notable exceptions such as southwest of England. It is important to note that the home postcode provided may not be the same as the location they are studying in, as many students travel some distance to college and others may be staying in halls of residence.



Figure 1: Postcode distribution across respondents.

The responses indicated that 97% of respondents identified as female, with 1.5% male and 1.5% prefer not to say. As access to the survey was facilitated by college staff providing the link to whole classes of students this indicates that equine is heavily gendered towards participation of females. This has been found in other areas of vocational education such as the predominance of males in construction and females in social care (McPherson et al 2022). Sport England (2025) Active Lives survey data for participation in equestrian sport shows a significantly higher number of females than males participating in riding horses. However, whilst gender of students studying equine is female dominated this is not the

case in all sectors of the industry. In racing for example only 11% of professional UK jockey licences are held by females (British Horseracing Authority 2018). Research by Losty and Sreenivas (2023) found that historically racing has been a male dominated industry and despite changes enabling women to ride and compete, there are still issues around equality of opportunity for females. A report on women's representation and diversity in the horse racing industry supported by the organisation Women-in-Racing found that whilst the industry has undergone significant change, with women becoming increasingly prominent, 'stereotypes still persisted with women associated with caring and nurturing rather than strategy and governance' (Clayton-Hathaway and Manfredi 2017, 5). Dashper (2016) found that despite the intense physical work involved in caring for horses which is undertaken by women, demonstrating their strength, they still tend to be positioned in the role of 'carer'.

Clayton-Hathaway and Manfredi (2017) made a number of suggestions aimed at tackling issues of diversity in the industry, in particular a focus on career development and support for women. Following their report, a steering group was established, now known as the Diversity in Racing Advisory Group who work with stakeholders to provide guidance and support on best practice with a focus on equality, diversity and inclusion.

Therefore, whilst the respondents in this study are 97% female it would be wrong to infer that this leads to a largely female workforce across all sectors of the industry. There may be factors which prevent females progressing from course to career or cause them to leave the industry. A Women-in-Racing report identified issues around motherhood and working, describing a leaky pipeline of women leaving the industry (Clayton-Hathaway and Stumbitz 2020), the result of which was the production of a series of resources to support both employees and employers on the topic of parenthood.

This is an area which requires further investigation across a range of occupations within the sector to identify its impact on the workforce.

### ***Respondents background and prior experience***

The findings showed that a significant number of the respondents, 90%, had been interested in horses for over five years. As students studying level three courses are generally in the 16-18 age range, this would indicate that this interest started in childhood or early adolescence. Only 2.7% of respondents were relatively new to the equine sector, which is a very small proportion.

The respondents were asked what prior experience they had with horses and could select multiple answers from a list. The responses are shown in figure 2. By far the most common experience was having lessons in a riding school with 65% of respondents engaging in these. This is a cause for concern if riding schools are declining in numbers as this will reduce opportunities for interaction with horses, which in turn could reduce the numbers coming forward to work in the sector. Working or volunteering at a stable also provided experience to a significant number of respondents. 136 of the 263 respondents owned a horse, so just over half (52%). The number of privately owned horses in the UK is estimated at 631K (British Equestrian 2023). 118 had loaned or shared a horse, this may be through a private agreement with the horse's owner, or through a riding school which offers the option to have a share in a horse allocating designated time each week for the sharer to care for and ride the horse. The results show that the physical environment of the stables plays a central part in the respondents' experiences, along with the practical experience gained in that setting. This has been referred to as the 'horse world' and encompasses a wide range horse-related activities, practices and ownership with the stable yard at its centre (Dashper 2016). Keaveney (2008) describes the intense sense of community and shared language that develops within a stable setting. It is suggested that at this early stage the students are already starting to feel part of a group or community of like-minded people and that this experience has a bearing on their decision to study an equine course.

Only 38 respondents had progressed from a level 2 course. Entry requirements for level 3 courses vary with colleges requesting four GCSEs at grade 4 or above. Many also have a practical or ridden assessment as part of their criteria. This indicates that a significant proportion of the respondents had achieved 4 or above in maths and English, although a caveat to this is the statement on several college websites stating those without maths and English would be required to study them.

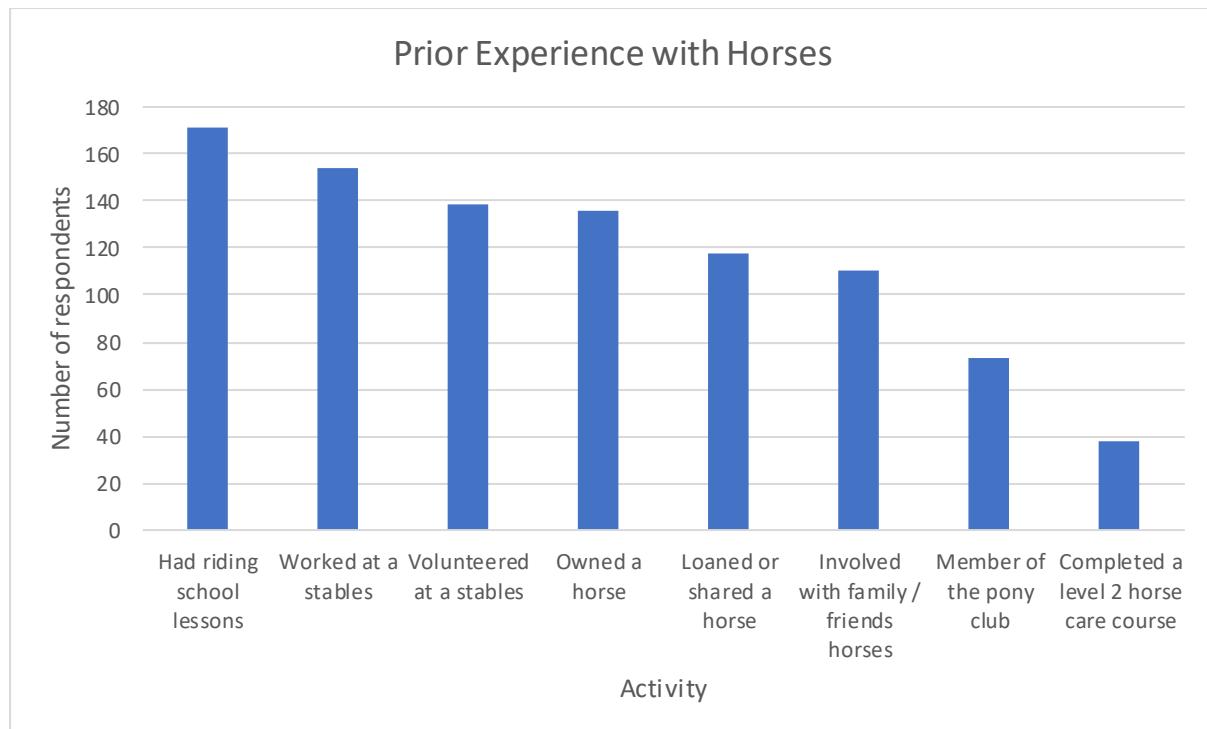


Figure 2: Prior experience with horses.

### ***Respondents intended destinations***

Respondents were asked what they intended to do once they had completed their current course of study. Figure 3 shows the intended destinations of the respondents. 27% of respondents intended to go onto an equine related higher education course. There has been a rise in the number of equine higher education (HE) courses in the UK, driven by market forces and student demand for vocational, employment-focused degrees. There are now a range of undergraduate and post graduate programmes in specialised areas such as equine behaviour and welfare, equine science and management, equine performance and rehabilitation and equine sports science and coaching. A search on the UCAS (Universities and Colleges Admissions Service) website for 'equine' identified 92 undergraduate courses from 22 providers. These courses often emphasise practical experience and industry links to enhance graduate employability, a key selling point for prospective students.

26% were intending to go directly into employment upon the completion of their course. 8% planned to take up an apprenticeship. As the vast majority of apprenticeships are at level 2 (equine groom) or level 3 (senior groom) this may represent a sideways rather than progressive next step for these respondents. 5% were going to take a gap year. 21% were

unsure of their next steps, and it is this group who are particularly worthy of consideration in terms of careers guidance and advice in relation to opportunities within the sector.

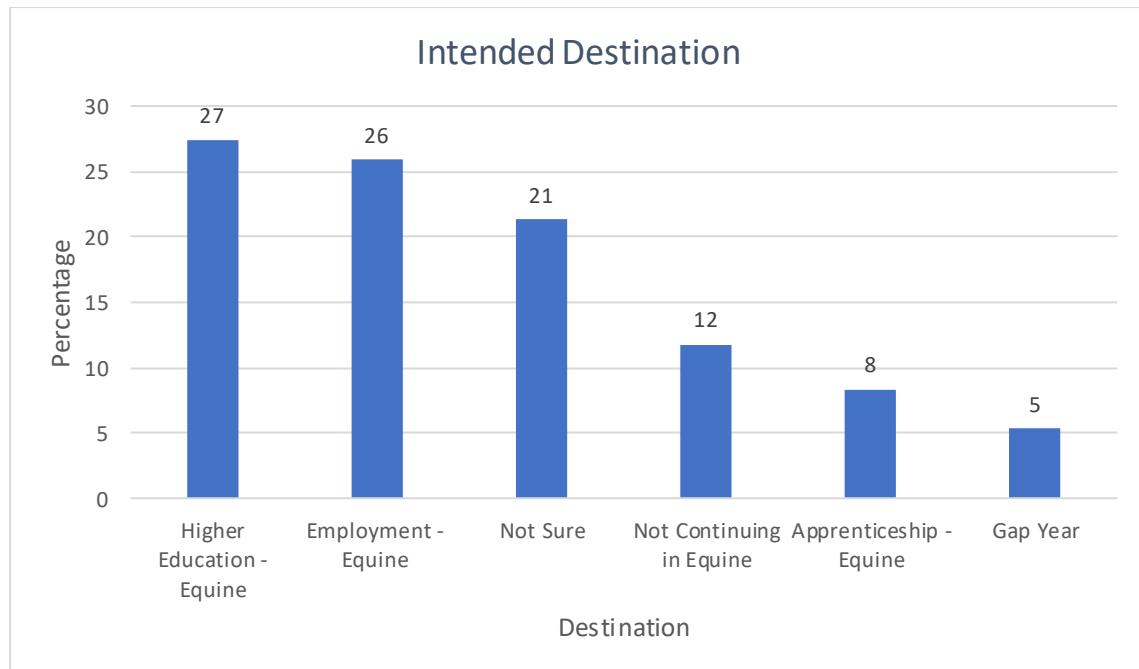


Figure 3: Intended Destinations

31 respondents (12%) had decided not to continue in the equine sector and exited the survey at this point. Therefore, from the initial 263, a remaining 232 continued on, to complete the full survey. Those not continuing in the equine sector were asked what they intended to do, of the 31 not continuing with horses just under a third (29%) were going to continue with animals in some form either in the agriculture or animal care industries.

#### **RQ1. Why do students choose to study equine?**

This question was free text allowing respondents to write their individual reasons for choosing to work in the sector. Several themes emerged from analysis of the data. It was evident that for many respondents there had been exposure to horses at an early age, respondents mention being around horses since childhood or growing up in horsey families, as these respondents explained:

I've always loved horses since I was a child and grew up with friends who participated in the sport.

My family have always had horses.

These formative experiences have influenced their career choice, for example:

I got into it at 6 years old and there's never been another path in my mind it has always been horses.

Phrases like 'always loved them', 'had them my whole life', and 'started riding young' appear frequently. In the analysis of the responses the word 'love' occurs in 47 of them indicating an emotional connection to the horse, for example:

I love horses and have a passion for working with them.

I love being around horses.

This emotional connection to horses is striking and possibly unusual although it may feature in other animal sectors. Research by Keaveney (2008) on equines and their human companions found that horses were the recipients of unconditional love. Finkel and Danby (2017, 387) explored gender and equine encounters and identified that 'emotional devotion to horses becomes a significant identity marker for women' and that this usually develops from childhood. This is influenced by the practical experiences described by the respondents such as riding lessons, loaning horses and participating in hands-on care, as seen in these statements:

I did riding lessons and then started volunteering with horses and enjoyed it.

I have always enjoyed looking after horses and riding since I was 7 years old.

For some the responsibility of providing care for the horse was a key factor in their choice to pursue a career in the industry.

I also enjoy the responsibility involved when working with horses

I've ridden since I was really young, and loved horses and enjoyed the care and responsibilities of having horses

Providing regular care can strengthen the attachment between humans and horses, as individuals invest large amounts of time at the stables to be with their horse. For some this connection had led to a desire to learn more about horses and to deepen their knowledge, skills and confidence across the industry, as shown in the quotes below.

I want to build my knowledge and confidence with different things to do with the equine industry.

The unique personality of each horse, advancing and learning, and riding and the vast opportunities in the equine industry.

It is perhaps not surprising for students that had chosen to study a vocational course in a practical setting that they valued practical work over classroom-based learning and showed a strong preference for working outside and being active. These quotes show that

part of the decision making process involved consideration of the type of learning that was included in the course.

Riding horses and being more practical rather than sat in lessons.

I prefer working outside compared to being inside and I prefer more practical forms of work.

The key factors here appear to be early exposure to horses often through family members who facilitate access to equine related activities, as evidenced in their stated experience prior to coming to college. These experiences involve riding and caring for horses through which many respondents develop a deep emotional connection. For some this is related to the practical nature of the work and for others the responsibility of providing care, both of which are seen as rewarding. Mukherjee (2020, 91) explains that 'the horse world denotes an entanglement, not only of horse and humans, but also the materialities of the stables, as well as the sights, sounds, touch, and smells that constitute it'. It appears from the responses that the respondents have been immersed in the 'horse world' (Dashper 2016) from an early age and this familiarity contributes to their decision to aim for a career in the sector.

Five respondents highlighted that they found working with horses beneficial from a mental health point of view and for two of these this was in regard to helping with anxiety. There is a small but developing body of literature on the social value of horses (British Equestrian 2024a) although much of it focuses on using horses in the treatment of existing conditions rather than in prevention.

Unsurprisingly considering the fact that exposure to horses is most likely through family members, 'family' was the most popular option for who had influenced the respondent's decision to work in the equine sector. It is often the case that young people are heavily influenced by parent or family advice (Mcpherson et al 2022). Friends and equine industry professionals also had an influence on the decision to study equine. These may be members of the equine community they interact with regularly such as peer groups at the stables or instructors at the riding school they attend. School and careers guidance staff had the least influence on the decision-making process. As equine is specialist area it may be that information on the range of careers in the equine industry is not widely available to students making post 16 choices. Figure 4 shows the ranking of the options available to the respondents.

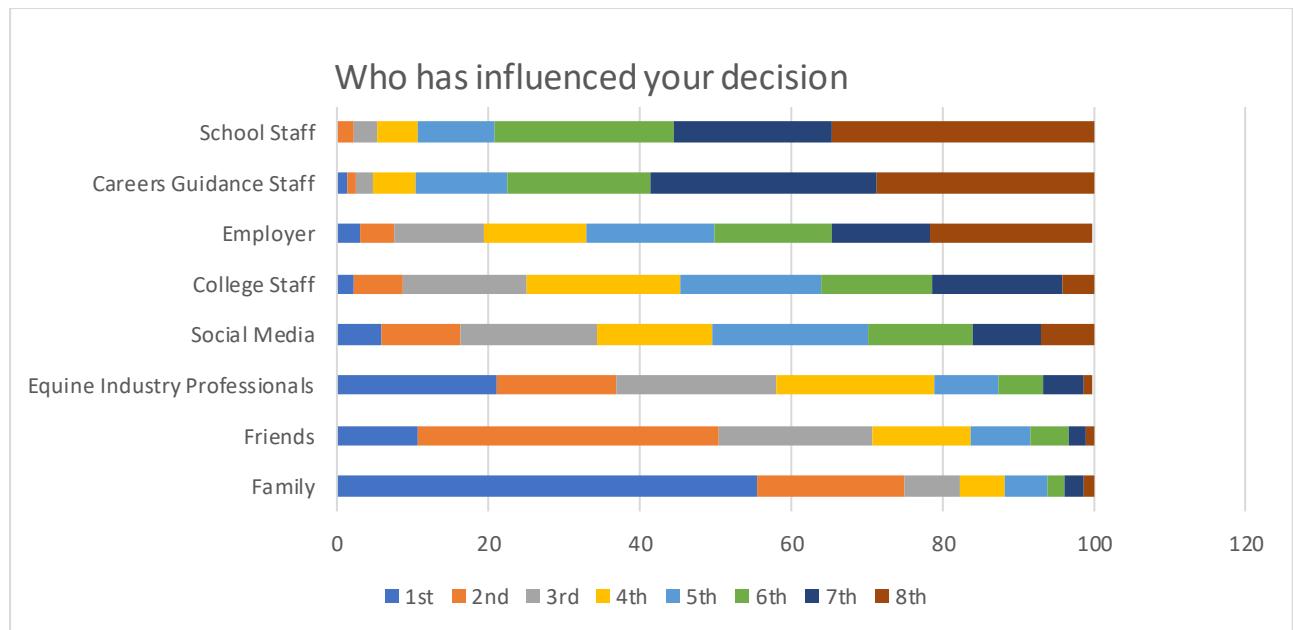


Figure 4: Who has influenced respondent's decision to work in the equine sector?

It is clear that the respondents had made a conscious decision to study equine based on their prior experiences of the equine sector. Whilst vocational education can be seen as something that young people sign up for upon leaving school simply as something to do (McPherson et al 2022) this did not appear to be the case with the respondents in this survey. Their emotional connection to the horse and desire to develop this into a career meant that they had made an active choice to attend a land-based college to study an equine course. Due to the rural location of land-based colleges students living in more urban areas may have to travel some distance to reach their nearest land-based college evidencing their commitment to the subject area. A relatively small number, 12%, had decided that they were not going to progress into the sector, but the remainder all expressed a desire to work either directly with horses or in an allied industry. From these responses it appears unlikely that a young person will select to study an equine course without significant prior exposure to horses and the wider equine sector.

The equine industry has identified this need for exposure to horses if it is to attract its future workforce. To address this the British Horseracing Authority initiatives such as the Riding a Dream Academy aims to provide unique and accessible opportunities that could lead to careers within racing for young people aged 13-16 years, promoting young people from diverse ethnic communities, disadvantaged backgrounds and urban equestrian centres to get involved in racing and support wider diversity, participation and inclusion within the sport (British Horseracing Authority 2025c). These initiatives are not just in racing,

British Equestrian, The Pony Club and Together an Active Future are working in collaboration to give young people from culturally diverse communities an experience of horses and riding, widening participation in the sport (British Equestrian 2025c). There is also the British Horse Society Changing lives through horses programme offered at 157 centres providing equine assisted learning to 5 to 25 year olds to help them develop key life skills (ibid). All of these are aimed at widening access to horses and in turn this may expand the pool of young people aiming for a career in the equine industry. Overall a picture has emerged of an industry which is aware of the challenges currently faced and is taking steps to try to address these through various strategies and initiatives to facilitate access to horses.

**RQ2. What are the intended career paths of students studying equine FE courses in England?**

The respondents were asked to select three areas of the sector they would be interested in working in and then give their first choice of these three. Concentrating on the respondents first choice shown in figure 5, it can be seen that equine therapy was the most popular with 14% of respondents selecting this. Equine therapy consists of the treatments used in maintaining the health and performance of the horse and in its rehabilitation following injury. This would commonly be a graduate profession and indications are that those planning to progress to higher education had chosen therapy as an intended area of work.

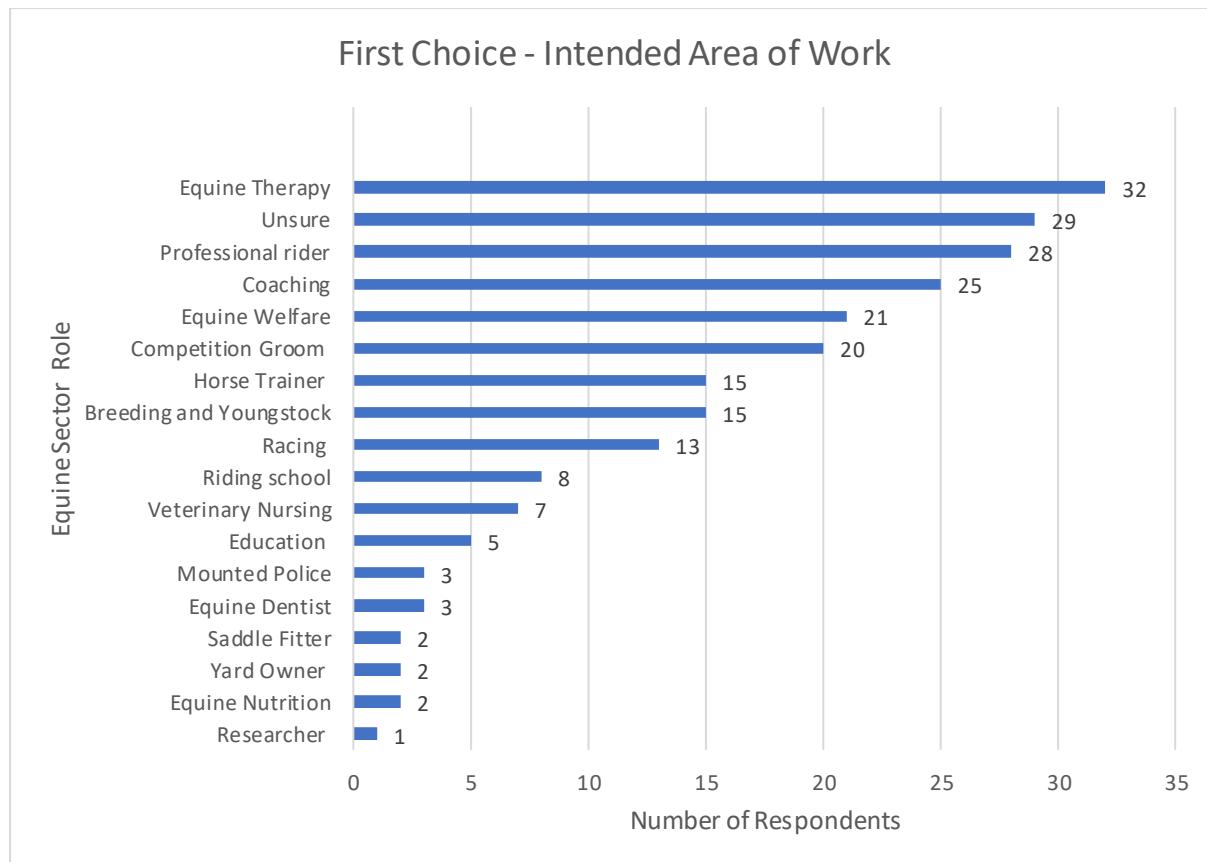


Figure 5: Intended area of work.

12% hope to be a professional rider, this is an extremely competitive area and requires either considerable investment or sponsorship to manage and produce competition horses. Interestingly from a gender equality perspective equestrian sport is the only Olympic sport where males and females compete against each other in the same event. Behind every top horse and rider there will be a team of professionals such as farriers, physiotherapists, nutritionists, coaches, saddlers, dentists, veterinary professionals all of whom work to maintain the horse in peak condition. At this level horses will have a dedicated groom and 8.5% hope to obtain employment in this area. Although clearly not all will work with Olympic riders, competition grooms often get to travel extensively as horses compete on a global stage.

Whilst 10.8% are interested in coaching, only eight respondents (3%) actually mentioned working in a riding school. It could be that those who have selected coaching intend to include riding school clients but this cannot be confirmed from the data. If only 3% of respondents plan to go into riding school work this does not indicate that there is a pipeline of individuals looking to work in this area, based on this survey. However, from earlier

responses it is clear that many of the respondents benefitted from being able to access riding schools at the start of their interest in horses. This indicates a gap between the current industry needs and the aspirations of these respondents which could be problematic for riding schools in terms of attracting their future workforce. It is unclear why this is the case and further research is needed to identify why the respondents do not aspire to work in the setting where they themselves gained valuable experience.

6% of respondents mention racing and a further 6.5% breeding and youngstock, again small numbers for a sector with a large proportion of vacancies. In racing, professional riders are known as jockeys, whereas in the disciplines of dressage and show jumping for example, they would be classed as riders. It is perhaps not surprising that the vast majority of the survey respondents are not considering careers in the racing industry, with only 13 mentioning it in their response. There are specialist colleges with bespoke programmes intended for those keen to progress into that sector, which were outside the scope of this study. However, the fact that there is a skills shortage indicates there is perhaps more work to do in raising the profile amongst those that are undecided in this case 12.5% of respondents. Recent research showed that '74% of 12–18-year-olds have little to no knowledge of the career opportunities available to them in the horseracing industry' (British Horseracing Authority 2025b, 13) and this may be a contributory factor in the small numbers of respondents planning to enter the industry. A workforce strategy for the British Horseracing Industry Board (Horseracing Industry People Board 2025, 7) aims to address the staffing challenges faced by the industry by focusing on key themes including recruitment with the intention of 'racing being considered as an attractive option by young people'.

Overall, across all respondents the range of options selected were broad and included some specialist roles such as saddle fitting and equine dentistry.

Respondents were asked why they had selected their chosen area of work and overwhelmingly it was due to it meeting their interests and aligning with their previous practical experience. This was another ranking question and the results can be seen in figure 6. Training opportunities and the potential to progress were also seen as important. This aligns with the need for the industry to 'raise training and progression opportunities' (BHIC 2005, 13) and to foster continuous professional development (British Equestrian 2025b). The key will be for employers to recognise this need and build this into their employment offer.

Being local to where they live was ranked least important, which is supported by the response to the question which asked if they would be willing to move out of area with 43% agreeing they would move for the right job. 20% of respondents wanted to stay within their current area and 37% were unsure.

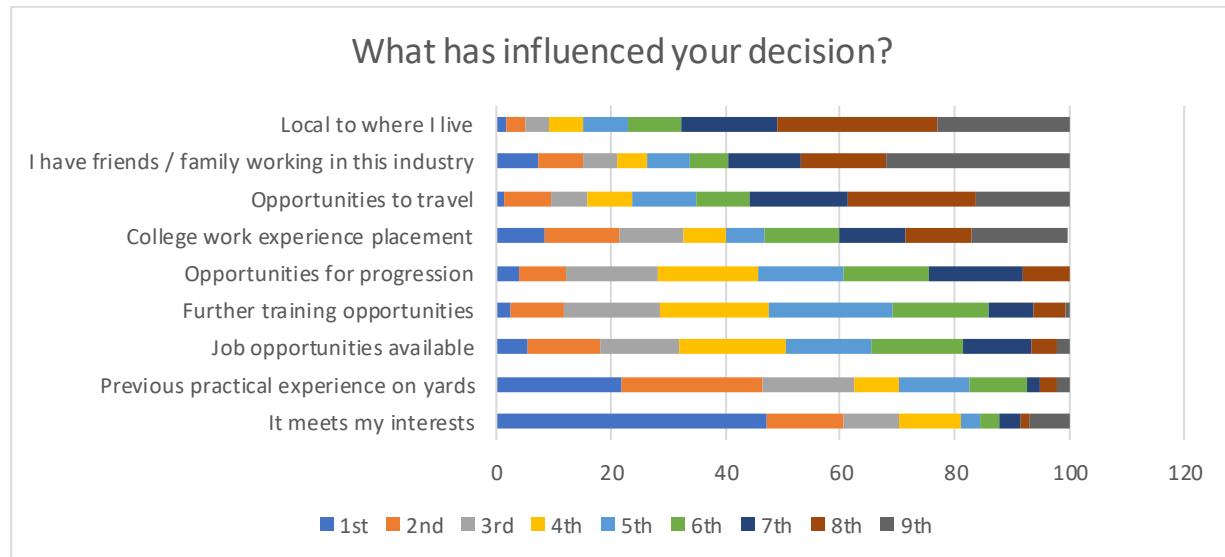


Figure 6: Reasons for selection of job role.

Exploring the second and third choices selected by respondents as possible areas of interest, it is interesting to note that many chose coaching as an option with 47 respondents (20%) selecting this. In particular 50% of those who had professional rider as their first choice, had selected coaching as an alternative option. This could be due to the link to sports and performance, working with horses in a competitive setting. Looking at other choices also gave a slightly more positive figure for riding schools with 23 respondents (9.9%) selecting this, so whilst working in a riding school may not have been a respondents first choice it still figured as a possible alternative. There is an opportunity here for riding schools to try to attract those respondents on completion of their courses.

Respondents were asked to describe their ideal equine job role. This was a free text question and therefore respondents could give whatever answer they wished. Jobs related to riding made up the largest proportion of responses with 17% indicating that their ideal job would involve riding, training or producing horses. For many, riding and training horses is an enjoyable aspect of horse ownership giving a sense of pride or achievement when training goals are reached. For others the thrill of competition was a draw, as can be seen in the following quotes:

I would love to have my own yard, backing and producing my own show horse.

Producing young horses and competing in show jumping at a high level.

The emphasis here is on producing, which involves all aspects of the horses training to be able to compete in a chosen sport. There is a great deal of time and work that goes into this, but it can be rewarding.

The second most popular area when describing ideal roles was equine therapy and veterinary roles with 16% of respondents stating this. These responses tended to be fairly brief for example:

Working as an equine rehabilitation specialist doing physiotherapy.

Working within my own business as an equine physiotherapist.

Respondents also mentioned areas such as hydrotherapy, whilst others were keen on equine veterinary nursing.

11% of respondents describe coaching or instructing as their ideal role. However only five specifically mention working in a riding school setting.

Teaching or coaching people how to ride at a riding school whilst having the opportunities to ride some of the horses that need more exercise or training

Coaching others and watching them progress is an idea I like the sound of.

8% of respondents felt working as a groom would be ideal. Top-level horses may travel across Europe or even globally and this includes long road hauls and sometimes flights. These respondents have identified how they can blend both their desire to travel with that of working with horses.

I would love to work in the racing industry and care for the horses involved. Being able to travel to many places around the world with this career would be ideal.

Working with top competition horses, ideally under 25 horses at a time, and providing them with the highest care this includes world-wide travel.

A small number wanted to work in equine welfare, so they could make a difference to horses in need such as the respondent below who sees the role as part horse care and part education.

My ideal equine job would be being able to save the equines that are being abused. This is because I have a passion for horse welfare. Educating the public on the humane ways of caring for a horse.

Self-employment is a recurring goal, often blending multiple roles, as this is seen as giving flexibility to continue to ride and compete alongside working, as shown in these responses:

My own business doing leatherwork with my own hours so that I can continue showjumping when I want.

Competing at high levels internationally (eventing) and owning my own competition yard and training other riders.

One respondent described how they wanted to have control of the amount and type of work they did:

My own yard or business so that I create relationships and connections in the industry as well as being my own boss, having my own timetable and working when I want to and choosing what tasks and jobs I offer.

However another respondent did identify a possible problem with this approach:

Working freelance is more ideal due to choosing hours although lack of work available at certain times is a downside.

This indicates that some of the respondents are aware of possible issues and practicalities with their ideal role.

Several respondents were open minded about their future job role, focusing instead on doing something they enjoyed with a good employer and having opportunities to develop.

Working at a kind, friendly yard where everyone feels at ease!

Something that doesn't feel like a job as I enjoy it that much.

Opportunities for me to learn and someone to teach me, near my home, good work environment.

The data shows that when describing their ideal job in the industry those that involve riding and training horses followed by work in the equine therapy or veterinary sector come out strongly. The ideal job roles described by the respondents provide an interesting insight into their aspirations and the features which are important to them. Some are pragmatic

about their choices and are able to identify both positive and negative features, for example that although working for yourself would be ideal, you may not have guaranteed work. Other responses detail a specific ambition such as being able to travel or a goal, such as producing a top show horse. The focus is on the horse as central to their future role, along with a work environment that is friendly and supportive. Whilst it is not possible to say how realistic these aspirations are for the individuals who hold them, they appear reasonable in relation to the opportunities that are available in the sector and provide an insight into the factors important to them in their future roles.

### **RQ3. What barriers do they think they may face in the industry?**

Respondents were able to select up to three answers from the list of barriers provided, shown in figure 7. The biggest perceived barrier was being unable to find a suitable job vacancy. Considering both riding schools and the racing industry are currently reporting staffing shortages it follows there would be a large number of jobs to apply for. However, it appears there may be a need to educate students about where to look for job vacancies as well as a need for employers to make their vacancies more visible to students leaving vocational education. It may be that the respondents are reflecting on their chosen area of work rather than sector vacancies in general in responding to this question. There is a disconnect between the 17% who perceive finding a suitable job vacancy as the main barrier and the response to the question 'what has influenced your decision' in relation to chosen area of work. Job opportunities available was ranked third as an influencing factor with 50% respondents selecting it as one of their first 4 choices out of a list of 9. As discussed this may be linked to the sector they hope to progress into and further analysis is needed.

Many felt that they didn't have the connections within the industry that would assist them in getting into their desired role. This could be addressed through careers events, talks and employers' panels to bridge the gap between students' vocational education and careers in the equine sector, many of which colleges already undertake. It is not clear from the research how aware students are about the current employment situation within the sector and there is perhaps further work for sector bodies to do in raising awareness of opportunities that exist.

The need to do further training was also identified as a possible barrier, this may relate to industry specific qualifications such as those required to be a coach, although this is only speculation and further research would be needed to verify this. However, a focus on

continued professional development has been identified as beneficial in attracting and retaining staff, so opportunities which focus on this as part of their employment offer may attract those students who feel that training is a barrier to achieving their aspiration. Some respondents feel there are no barriers to entering the sector. The amount of practical experience the respondents have was rated least likely to be a barrier. It is possible this links to the fact that many have been involved with horses since childhood with 90% having been interested in horses for over five years. It is not possible to comment on the relevance of this experience but it appears to give confidence to the respondents that a lack of practical experience won't pose an issue for them entering the industry.



Figure 7: Barriers to working in the equine industry.

## 5. Conclusions

The key findings of the study are that the student body is largely female and whilst there are other subject areas which are either heavily male, such as construction or female such as care (McPherson et al 2022) it is not the case that this bias is represented in the workforce across all sections of the industry. The respondents had chosen to study equine following early exposure to horses and the opportunity to gain practical experience with them. This in many cases had led to a deep emotional connection with 20% of respondents intending to work in the equine industry expressing their 'love' of horses. This emotional connection to the horse appeared to be a motivating factor in selecting the industry as an area to work in, however it was not always clear how aware the respondents were of the realities of working in the sector. The stables as a physical location played a key role in this developing a sense of community and belonging in the 'horse world'

(Dashper 2016). For many, it appears that this was facilitated through having riding school lessons and therefore this is key to providing a pipeline of entrants to the industry. This will be problematic if individuals do not come forward to work in riding schools, as horse ownership is not realistic for many due to the logistics and costs involved. Alongside this practical experience, family members played a key role in the decision making process, validating the individual's choice to study equine. This aligns with findings by McPherson et al (2022) who found that family members heavily influenced young peoples' career choices. 88% of the total number of students surveyed clearly aspired to work in some aspect of equine sector. The issue is not in colleges attracting students but that some sectors within the industry are not attracting the students once they have finished their course. This is clearly a multifaceted issue, but there may be a greater role for careers advice and guidance in relation to making students aware of the breadth of opportunities available in the industry. This may be particularly relevant in areas where employers are struggling to recruit. Raising the profile, benefits and career progression available in these areas may help to attract and retain staff.

A Department for Education (2024) Skills England report identified three possible issues with skills. Firstly, a mismatch where the skills employers require do not match those held by individuals. Secondly a shortage where demand for specific skills exceed supply and thirdly a skills gap where the employees are perceived to have the wrong type of level of skills. The addition of six racing related roles to the skilled worker immigration salary list allowing employers to attract talent from overseas indicates that there is a skills shortage in those areas. A workforce strategy for the horseracing industry reports that '18% of racehorse trainers and 19% of stud employers report having skills gaps' (Horseracing Industry Peoples Board 2025, 22). Riding schools are reporting staff shortages and British Equestrian (2024b) identifies the 'pressing need to address workforce challenges' but it is not clear whether this is due to mismatch, shortage or gap in the skills possessed by individuals. This area is worthy of further investigation as a detailed understanding of skills needs can inform the actions taken to address the issues, for example the knowledge and skills included in the curriculum for those studying equine courses and the professional development required to upskill those currently in the sector.

A Skills England report in 2025 (Department for Education 2025b) made several recommendations to tackle the skills shortages faced by many sectors. There are three of these which are particularly applicable to the equine sector. Firstly, the need to build a more diverse work force through addressing issues such as gender equality. Secondly the need for upskilling and reskilling opportunities for those in the sector. Lastly the need

for excellent careers advice, however it may not be as simple as matching individuals to opportunities particularly if these fall outside their area of interest. It is suggested that there is a role for sector bodies to play in raising awareness of opportunities at the point at which students choose vocational education, prior to their entry to the workforce. Careers guidance could be strengthened although this would require detailed subject specific knowledge and may be outside the scope of what could reasonably be expected to be provided in a school setting.

This research focused on aspirations of those currently enrolled on full time equine courses. Further research which followed students from aspiration to destination would be of value, in the form of qualitative studies to explore transitions from college to the workplace. The data presented is amalgamated for England and could be broken down to explore regional differences. Longitudinal studies would be of value in following career paths for those entering the sector. Comparison with other areas of provision such as animal care or veterinary nursing may also shed more light on whether the emotional connection, in this case with horses, is unique or replicated elsewhere as a factor in career decision making.

The study has provided a snapshot in time of respondents' career plans gathered during the summer term of 2025. Obtaining the views of these students has provided a unique and powerful insight into their aspirations for their future careers which may be useful for employers, colleges and industry bodies to consider.

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## Appendix 1 - Survey Questions

1. Are you currently studying a level 3 equine course?
  - Yes – first year
  - Yes – second year
  - No

*Respondents answering 'no' leave the survey at this point.*

2. Are you:
  - Male
  - Female
  - Prefer not to say
3. How long have you been interested in horses?
  - 1 – 2 years
  - 3 – 4 years
  - 5 years or more
4. What experience did you have prior to starting the level 3 course? Tick all that apply.
  - No prior experience
  - Owned a horse
  - Loaned or shared a horse
  - Had riding school lessons
  - Involved with family / friends horses
  - Worked at a stables
  - Volunteered at a stables
  - Member of the pony club
  - Completed a level 2 horse care course
  - Other
5. What are your plans on completing the level 3 equine course?
  - Higher Education – Equine Course
  - Employment – Equine Industry
  - Apprenticeship – Equine
  - Gap Year / Travel
  - Not sure
  - I am not going to continue with equine

*Those who responded that they were not going to continue with equine, progressed to question 6 which asked what they intended to do on completing the course. They then exited the survey at this point. The rest progressed to question 7.*

6. What are your plans on completion of the level 3?
7. What has attracted you to working with horses?
8. Who has influenced your decision to work with horses? Rank in order.

Family

Friends  
College Staff  
School Staff  
Careers Guidance Staff  
Social Media  
Equine Industry Professionals (Coaches / Trainers)  
Employer

9. What is your intended area of work? Select up to 3.

- Coaching
- Riding School
- Competition Grooming
- Equine Therapy
- Equine Welfare
- Equine Nutrition
- Professional Rider / Horse Trainer
- Education
- Breeding and Youngstock
- Racing
- Not Sure
- Other

10. From the list above what would be your first choice?

11. What has influenced your decision? Rank in order.

Previous practical experience on yards  
College work experience placement  
Job opportunities available  
Further training opportunities  
Opportunities for progression  
Local to where I live  
Opportunities to travel  
I have friends / family working in this industry  
It meets my interests

12. What is the first half of your postcode?

13. What location would you like to work in?

- I would like to find a job in the area where I live
- I would be willing to move to a new area for the right job
- Not sure

14. What barriers might there be to achieving your career plan in the equine industry? Select up to 3 options.

- No barriers

- Finding a suitable job vacancy
- Lack of practical experience
- Difficulty travelling to work
- Competition for jobs
- No connections in the industry
- The need to do further training
- Wages available
- Cost of travel
- Other

15. Describe your ideal equine job.